

Suicide Prevention

Co-workers Perspective

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Hector had worked with Dolores for 3 years...

While they were not good friends, they were friendly. Recently, Hector noticed that Dolores had changed. Dolores had always kept to herself, but lately she seemed to avoid her co-workers as much as possible. She stopped eating in the lunchroom and ate by herself in the park across the street. She was becoming uncharacteristically abrupt with customers. On a number of occasions, Dolores looked like she had been crying. But Hector just did not feel comfortable asking Dolores about this. Instead, he asked Martha, another co-worker, if she thought anything was wrong with Dolores. Martha seemed relieved that someone else had noticed and confirmed all of Hector's observations. She also said that Dolores had told her that she had been "really sad" and "just didn't know if she could go on." Hector did not know what to do. He was concerned, but was not sure if any of this was really his business. The next day he saw Dolores crying in the stockroom. He told the head of his company's human resources office about Dolores. She said that she would tell Dolores that some of her co-workers were concerned about her and remind Dolores that she could talk to a counselor at the company's employee assistance program about what was troubling her.



The Role of Co-workers in Preventing Suicide

Suspecting that a co-worker is considering ending his or her life can be frightening and confusing. You may not know when you should become involved in the problems of someone who is not a family member or close friend. You may be unsure of what you can really do to help someone with emotional difficulties or feel uncertain whether your co-worker is actually in serious trouble. Being wrong could be embarrassing. But being right could save a life. This publication will help you recognize and help co-workers who may be considering suicide.



Recognizing the Warning Signs

Each year, more than 30,000 Americans take their own lives. An additional 500,000 Americans visit emergency rooms for injuries related to suicide attempts. A large number of suicides and suicide attempts are related to treatable emotional conditions including depression and other mood disorders as well as alcohol and drug abuse. People often want to conceal their suicidal thoughts, depression, or alcohol and drug abuse. They may be embarrassed by these problems or fear that public disclosure will hurt their careers - although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination in employment because of mental impairment.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

People who are in danger of suicide often display warning signs. You may be in a good position to recognize these signs in the people with whom you work - even if they are trying to conceal their problems. You see co-workers on a regular basis and know how they talk, act, and react to stress in the workplace. You can recognize changes in their behavior, personality, or mood. Such changes may be a proverbial "cry for help." Signs that a suicidal crisis is imminent can include:

- ❑ Talking about suicide or death
- ❑ Making statements like "I wish I were dead." and "I'm going to end it all."
- ❑ Less direct verbal cues, including "What's the point of living?" "Soon you won't have to worry about me" and "Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?"
- ❑ Uncharacteristically isolating themselves from others in the workplace
- ❑ Expressing feelings that life is meaningless or hopeless
- ❑ Giving away cherished possessions
- ❑ A sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn
- ❑ Neglect of appearance and hygiene
- ❑ Sudden unexplained deterioration of work performance or productivity



Recognizing the Warning Signs

There is no foolproof way of telling that someone may be thinking of taking his or her life. But these warning signs can also indicate that a person has serious problems that affect his or her life, productivity, and the work environment. By recognizing and acting on these signs, you can help a co-worker find professional assistance and become healthier, happier, and more productive.



Responding to the Warning Signs

You should respond to warning signs that a co-worker may be thinking of suicide. If you are comfortable speaking with this person, you should ask the difficult questions that can help you understand that person's state-of-mind and intentions. Don't be afraid to approach the issue directly and just ask: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" or "Do you feel like you want to die?" If their response gives any indication that they have been considering suicide or having suicidal thoughts, ask them to find help immediately. Offer to accompany them to your company's employee assistance program (EAP) and make an appointment with a counselor. If your company does not have an EAP, offer to help them find another source of mental health counseling. More information on how to find such counseling is provided below. You can also suggest they call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The Lifeline provides crisis counseling and referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Responding to the Warning Signs

If you think a person is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone until you have found help. This may require mobilizing other co-workers or the person's friends or family. If your co-worker is unwilling to seek help or is uncooperative or combative, call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you "is a danger to themselves," or "they cannot take care of themselves." These phrases will alert the dispatcher that there is an immediate threat. Do not hesitate to make such a call if you suspect someone may be on the verge of harming him or herself.



Responding to the Warning Signs

Some of your co-workers may be personal friends. You may maintain a more professional relationship with others. And some of your relationships with co-workers may be strained or even antagonistic. If your relationship with a co-worker who may be thinking about suicide is such that you do not want to talk to him or her about these issues, express your concern to someone else - perhaps a colleague who is friendly with that person or a member of the human resources department or employee assistance program (if you have one). If you need help in deciding who can help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

If A Suicide Happens

The suicide of a co-worker - even if it does not occur on the job - can have a profound emotional effect on the workplace. Other employees may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions about what they should have done to help. Some employees may experience depression or suicidal thoughts after such an experience. Many EAPs or private mental health professionals offer grief counseling or "postvention" services for exactly these situations. For additional information on helping yourself and others recover from such a trauma, see the Survivors publication http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/customized/survivors.asp in this series.



Seeking Professional Help

The emotional problems associated with suicide - including depression, bipolar disorder, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs - are difficult conditions requiring professional assistance. One of the most important things you can do for someone who may be considering suicide is help him or her find professional help. This may require overcoming his or her reluctance to go to a mental health professional. Your company's human resources department or employee assistance program can provide assistance in locating professional help.

General Resources on Suicide and Suicide Prevention

- **If you are thinking about suicide or hurting yourself, or if you think someone you know is seriously thinking about suicide, please talk to a responsible adult or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). This telephone hotline is available 24/7. The people who answer this hotline will help you.**

- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)**
<http://www.sprc.org/>
SPRC provides prevention support, training, and materials to strengthen suicide prevention efforts. Among the resources found on its website is the SPRC Library Catalog (<http://library.sprc.org/>), a searchable database containing a wealth of information on suicide and suicide prevention, including publications, peer-reviewed research studies, curricula, and web-based resources. Many of these items are available online.